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Magie: Rezeptions- und diskursgeschichtliche Analysen von der Antike bis zur Neuzeit

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Magie: Rezeptions- und diskursgeschichtliche Analysen von der Antike bis zur Neuzeit

Abstract

What is one to make of a seven-hundred-page book that, by its own admission, only addresses the “tip of the iceberg” of its chosen topic (615)? Certainly, the topic is enormous: nothing less than the twenty-five-hundred-year history of conceptions of magic in Western culture, from the ancient Greeks to the present day. Otto writes from the perspective of religious studies, and he reacts in particular to the century-long effort by modern scholars of religion to define magic in some coherent and appropriately wissenschaftlich way. In the first hundred pages of his book, Otto examines the “academic discourse of magic,” focusing mainly on the highly influential formulations of James Frazer and Émile Durkheim, although Edward Tylor, Bronislaw Malinowski, and other famous figures make supporting appearances. He concludes, unsurprisingly, that all attempts to develop universalist definitions of magic have failed. Hans Kippenberg’s notion of the “decay of the category” (Zerfall der Kategorie) becomes a touchstone throughout this section and indeed the entire book.

Keywords

History of Magic, Definition of Magic, Classical Age Magic, Greece, Renaissance Magic, Modern Magic, Religious Studies, Magiebegriff

Disciplines

European History | History of Religions of Western Origin | Other Religion | Social History

Comments

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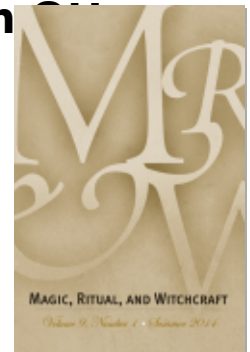
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**Magie: Rezeptions- und diskursgeschichtliche Analysen
von der Antike bis zur Neuzeit by Bernd-Christian
(review)**

Michael D. Bailey

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Reviews

BERND-CHRISTIAN OTTO. *Magie: Rezeptions- und diskursgeschichtliche Analysen von der Antike bis zur Neuzeit*. Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten 57. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2011. Pp. xii + 699.

What is one to make of a seven-hundred-page book that, by its own admission, only addresses the “tip of the iceberg” of its chosen topic (615)? Certainly, the topic is enormous: nothing less than the twenty-five-hundred-year history of conceptions of magic in Western culture, from the ancient Greeks to the present day. Otto writes from the perspective of religious studies, and he reacts in particular to the century-long effort by modern scholars of religion to define magic in some coherent and appropriately *wissenschaftlich* way. In the first hundred pages of his book, Otto examines the “academic discourse of magic,” focusing mainly on the highly influential formulations of James Frazer and Émile Durkheim, although Edward Tylor, Bronislaw Malinowski, and other famous figures make supporting appearances. He concludes, unsurprisingly, that all attempts to develop universalist definitions of magic have failed. Hans Kippenberg’s notion of the “decay of the category” (*Zerfall der Kategorie*) becomes a touchstone throughout this section and indeed the entire book.

Despite such failures, Otto maintains that we should still think about how magic has been and continues to be defined, mainly because the term is clearly not going to fall out of use anytime soon, either within the academy or in popular culture. He proposes that scholars take a historical approach, examining how the concept of magic (*Magiebegriff*) has developed and been received in Western culture. But how should one accomplish this monumental task? His method, in the five hundred pages that comprise the second part of his book, “Historical Analyses,” is to move very selectively through the centuries. The first chapter of Part II deals with classical Greek concepts of magic, and of course the origin of the term itself, derived from the Persian *magoi*. The second chapter addresses the Roman reception of Greek concepts, while the third turns to Christianity, focusing mainly on Augustine. Otto wants to address what he sees as the foundational moments of certain lines of discourse about magic, so the patristic era is essentially as far as he goes into the long Christian tradition of condemning magic as demonic. For those

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expecting medieval necromancers or early modern witches, they will find none here. Instead, Otto turns at this point from what he terms the “*Ausgrenzungsdiskurs*” about magic (ostracizing or condemnatory discourse) to focus in his three subsequent chapters on the “*Aufwertungsdiskurs*,” meaning positive and valorizing discussions of magic by writers who self-identified as magicians. First he examines the late-antique Greek magical papyri, then the figure of the Renaissance magus, mainly through the work of Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, then major figures of modern European occultism, primarily Aleister Crowley, but also Eliphas Lévi, Madame Blavatsky, and others.

There are problems with this approach. Obviously, when covering the whole of Western history, selectivity is necessary, but huge chunks of the history of magic are left out here. While the Roman reception of Greek concepts of magic gets a full chapter of focused attention, Thomas Aquinas’s reception of Augustine’s condemnation of magic merits only passing reference. Likewise the massive influx of Arab writings on magic in the high medieval period receives slight and scattered coverage. Major early modern demonologists such as Bodin or del Rio are not mentioned at all. Neither are any of the great skeptical writers who ultimately demolished the discourse of magic as demonic terror. One could counter that the lines of transmission from Augustine to Aquinas to early modern demonologists are the most well studied in the history of European magic and do not need reiteration here. This is hardly a slim volume, however, and much of its bulk comes from Otto’s insistence on explicating, often at considerable length, basic aspects of the thought of the much-studied figures on whom he does focus. No serious student of Western religion or magic needs the extended reiterations of the essential ideas of Frazer, Durkheim, Augustine, or Ficino that are provided here.

After his long slog through Western history, the conclusions that Otto draws from his historical analyses will not startle anyone familiar with any of the various contexts through which he has trekked. Western ideas of magic were always polyvalent and shifting. Nevertheless, they obviously served a useful function across many centuries, for those writing in both the condemnatory and the valorizing traditions. Otto calls useful attention to many basic similarities between these two strands of discourse. He also concludes that many aspects of the modern “academic discourse” of magic arise from or at least reflect tendencies in various historical discourses. Frankly, I would have liked to have seen a more radical approach to that point, positioning Frazer, Durkheim, and the rest not in a segregated “academic” section at the start of

the book but as the last of the “historical analyses” through which the book proceeds.

There are other more minor points of complaint. For one, perhaps because of its length, the book is plagued by copyediting errors. For another, while Otto has clearly digested a vast range of scholarship, some notable names are missing. Valerie Flint figures nowhere in his discussion of late antique/early Christian magic, for example, nor does Alexandra Owen in his treatment of Crowley or the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Finally, I found it odd that Otto so frequently invokes the *Harry Potter* novels (along with the *Lord of the Rings*, and comic-book superheroes such as the X-Men) to illustrate his claim that magic as both a term and a category (super-powered people doing wondrous things) remains deeply ingrained in Western culture, but he makes only passing reference to literary treatments of magic in the long course of Western history. Thus an entire dimension of the historical discourse about magic is largely excluded from consideration.

This is a big book (in both the literal and figurative sense) that addresses some extremely important questions faced by all scholars of magic; namely, what is it, exactly, that we are studying; why has its meaning always been so slippery; and, perhaps most importantly, why has it nonetheless remained so powerfully entrenched as a category in Western culture? These are issues that often crop up in the introductions or conclusions of more narrowly focused historical studies, but they need to be placed front and center from time to time, and I admire Otto’s effort to do this. In fact, I wish he had concentrated entirely on his central issues of transmission and reception of the *Magiebegriff*, rather than so often giving in to basic exposition, because I found the force of his argument was frequently lost in those long descriptions of mostly familiar developments. Given that the various moments he selects for his historical analyses are only the tip of the iceberg anyway, treating them more concisely could have sharpened the book’s overall impact.

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S.K. FORREST MENDOZA. *Witches, Whores, and Sorcerers: The Concept of Evil in Early Iran*. Foreword and other contributions by Prods Oktor Skjaervø. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011. Pp. xi + 231.

In *Witches, Whores, and Sorcerers: The Concept of Evil in Early Iran*, S. K. Mendoza Forrest has examined the Avesta to determine how Zoroastrian